

## TAIWAN

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### Melos or Pylos?

*James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara*

**T**he past four years have witnessed an unexpected warming of relations between the United States and China. The rancor generated by the EP-3 spy-plane controversy and the debate over American arms sales to Taiwan dissipated in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Beijing supported the U.S.-led campaign in Afghanistan. It has co-

operated with the United States in the war on terror, sharing intelligence and coordinating law-enforcement efforts.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most strikingly, Chinese officials have worked quietly but assiduously to break the nuclear impasse on the Korean Peninsula.

Understandably, many observers in the West have hailed the seeming shift in Chinese foreign policy in a more pro-American direction, interpreting it as evidence that Sino-American relations will remain on the upswing. Other moves by Beijing, however, cast doubt on this optimistic view. Wary of Taiwan's seeming drift toward independence, China has stationed some five hundred ballistic missiles across the Taiwan Strait from the island and is deploying additional missiles each year.<sup>2</sup> These missiles have no plausible purpose other than to coerce Taipei into opening talks on reunification with the mainland—or, failing that, to batter the island into submission.

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Chinese leaders have talked, loudly and often, about doing just that if the Taiwanese persevere in President Chen Shui-bian's plans to enact a new constitution by 2008.<sup>3</sup> Beijing interprets Chen's advocacy of a new constitution as a precursor to *de jure* independence from the mainland. In the meantime China has pursued an aggressive program of military modernization, purchasing or building the armaments it would need to make good its threats against the island.<sup>4</sup> Of particular note are purchases of aircraft, warships, and missiles overtly intended to give the People's Liberation Army (PLA) the ability to fend off U.S. reinforcements if indeed Beijing chooses war.<sup>5</sup>

On the other side of the Strait, the deeply divided Taiwanese electorate and legislature have been unable to agree to arm themselves.<sup>6</sup> Plans to purchase diesel submarines from the United States, for example, have effectively been shelved;<sup>7</sup> that decision leaves the Taiwanese navy with only four boats—two of World War II vintage—to fight off China's large, increasingly potent undersea force.<sup>8</sup> The outlook for Taiwan's surface fleet is equally bleak. Four retired American guided-missile destroyers are scheduled for delivery starting this year, but Washington, fearful of antagonizing Beijing, has yet to approve the sale of Aegis destroyers that Taiwan really needs if it is to shoot down the barrage of ballistic missiles likely to be lofted its way in wartime.<sup>9</sup> Even if the Bush administration relents on an Aegis sale, it remains doubtful that Taiwanese lawmakers will be able to set aside their factional bickering long enough to approve the billions needed for such a purchase.

In short, the cross-Strait military balance is tipping rapidly in favor of the mainland at a time when pressure is mounting on Beijing to act. The likelihood of a war in the Strait in the near term has risen sharply. If the military imbalance continues to grow and Taipei persists with Chen's plans for a new constitution, thus edging toward one of Beijing's red lines for military action, Taiwan could suffer the fate that befell another island nation that dared, two and a half millennia ago, to defy a powerful neighbor that coveted its territory. Taiwan needs to consider that fate and how it can be avoided. China too could learn from island wars of antiquity. Beijing ought to take a clear-eyed look at the hazards of protracted maritime war before it reaches for the gun. Finally, the United States could find in this historical case grist for some of the hard thinking it has to do about the cross-Strait impasse.

#### MELOS AND TAIWAN

The classics can help Taiwanese, Chinese, and American leaders sort out the situation in the Taiwan Strait. In 416 BC the leadership of the Greek city-state of Melos opted to fight the mighty Athenian empire rather than accept vassal status. Athens had been at war against Sparta, to the south in the Peloponnesus,

more or less continuously since 431 BC (see map). Athens had been unable to make much headway on land against the vaunted Spartan infantry, while Sparta was no match for Athens at sea. Frustrations were mounting on both sides. A fragile peace was in place, but it was in the process of unraveling.<sup>10</sup>

Athens chose this moment to target Melos. Why? Thucydides, the premier historian of the Peloponnesian War and an eyewitness to many of the war's events, sheds light on Athenian motives in his account of the Melian Dialogue,



the famous exchange between top Melian leaders and an Athenian delegation dispatched to wring surrender from them in advance. After pleading unsuccessfully with the Athenian ambassadors to allow the island to maintain its neutrality, the Melian Council opted for defiance. Melos fell after a brief siege. The Athenian assembly voted to kill its adult male population and enslave the women and children.

Several themes emerge from the Melian Dialogue that bear on China-Taiwan relations. First of all, questions of justice do not arise in international politics absent a rough parity of arms between the contending sides. This elemental reality was not lost on the Melian spokesmen, who seem to have resigned themselves to defeat from the beginning. “We see that you have come prepared to judge the argument yourselves, and that the likely end of it all will be either war, if we prove that we are in the right, and so refuse to surrender, or else slavery.”<sup>11</sup>

The Athenians agreed, noting that in practical terms “the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.” For them this was divine law. “Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can.” This was a permanent precept of international relations, concluded the Athenians: “Anybody else with the same power as ours”—including the Melians—“would be acting in precisely the same way.”

The geopolitical realities and the power disparity involved in today's cross-Strait relations are as stark as they were in classical Greece. Even a quick glance at the map (page 48) shows that China, by its size and proximity to Taiwan, casts a long and ominous shadow over the island. China's military and economic resurgence and its pretensions to great-power status have already sown doubt that Taipei could hold Beijing at bay for long. Not surprisingly, some analysts and policy makers in the West have already resigned themselves to the apparently inevitable outcome for Taiwan.<sup>12</sup> In essence they have succumbed to Thucydides' maxim concerning the repercussions of fundamental power imbalances between nations.

This is more than mere perception—the military balance *is* shifting in China's favor. As we have seen, Beijing is pursuing a determined, methodical military modernization program, while the Taiwanese legislature remains deadlocked over the future of the nation's defense. The qualitative advantage long enjoyed by the Taiwanese armed forces began to slip away in the mid-1990s, and it continues to do so.

As the preponderance of power shifts toward the mainland, the arguments proffered by those with a sanguine view of the cross-Strait stalemate lose credence.<sup>13</sup> China will gain a decisive military edge in the Strait, and sooner rather than later. Indeed, by some accounts a reckoning with Chen's regime could take place this decade. If dominant power does in fact negate considerations of justice in asymmetric relationships, as the Athenian ambassadors maintained, China may soon be able to act against Taiwan with impunity.

Second, a powerful nation can use its armed might for a variety of purposes derived from the Thucydidean motives of fear, honor, and interest. An empire might, for instance, use its military power to acquire strategically placed territories. "By conquering you," proclaimed the Athenian ambassadors, "we shall increase not only the size but the security of our empire." For Athens there were obvious geostrategic advantages to wresting Melos from its inhabitants. The island was ideally positioned off the southeast coast of the Peloponnese. Operating from bases on the island, the formidable Athenian navy could conduct operations along the Spartan periphery, amplifying the already dominant seapower of Athens.

The Athenians also wanted to make an example of Melos, which had stubbornly maintained its independence in past years and had taken up arms to resist the imperial will. Many Athenian allies, weary of the high cost of war and the increasingly tyrannical behavior of Athens, had grown restive. The Athenians could not allow the Melians to defy them, lest they embolden others to seek liberty from imperial rule. "We rule the sea and you are islanders, and weaker islanders too than the others," observed the Athenian emissaries to the Melians; "it is therefore particularly important that you should not escape."

The strategic calculations evident in the Athenians' deliberations about Melos, particularly with respect to the island's favorable geographic position and its potential to encourage would-be rebels, can be detected in Chinese thinking about Taiwan. Another look at the map makes it abundantly clear that geographic destiny binds Taiwan to China. The island's position off the Chinese coast imposes a natural constraint on naval power-projection from the mainland. In a very real sense, then, Beijing's aspirations to regional and world power hinge on gaining control of Taiwan.<sup>14</sup>

The Chinese landmass radiates outward into the Pacific in a broad arc reaching from the Shandong Peninsula in the north to Hainan Island in the south. Yet the island chain that stretches from the Japanese home islands to the Philippine archipelago envelops this continental crest. Taiwan holds a central position in the island chain, sitting directly and conspicuously opposite the center point of the mainland's coastline.

For Beijing, in short, Taiwan represents either a gateway to the western Pacific, a vast expanse long dominated by the U.S. Navy, or a sentinel blocking China's strategic access to the high seas.<sup>15</sup> Chinese analysts are quick to quote Secretary

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*Fear, honor, interest—Thucydides could scarcely have phrased it better.*

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of State Dean Acheson, who in 1950 sketched a "defense perimeter of the Pacific" running along the island chain;<sup>16</sup> they

also recall General Douglas MacArthur, who famously depicted Taiwan as "an unsinkable aircraft carrier," able to radiate power along China's coasts.<sup>17</sup>

Not surprisingly, Chinese strategists have repeatedly urged Beijing to neutralize the hostile forces occupying the island, thereby ensuring that China's navy can operate freely along the nation's maritime periphery and project power beyond the island-chain perimeter.<sup>18</sup> They hope to extend China's own defense perimeter seaward, in effect inverting Acheson's strategy.

There is also an inescapable imperial dimension to China's strategic calculus, just as there was for the Athens of antiquity. The Chinese leadership understands that failure to subdue Taiwan could embolden independence movements within its own far-flung and ethnically disparate western provinces, namely Tibet and Xinjiang.<sup>19</sup> Just as Athens's increasingly tenuous hold over its empire hardened its position over Melos, Beijing can ill afford to "lose" Taiwan, for fear of unleashing even greater centrifugal forces in China's hinterlands. Unification with Taiwan promises to foreclose the possibility that separatists will draw inspiration from Taiwanese insolence.

Beyond its imperial possessions, Beijing worries about China's domestic constituents, who are riven by deeply ingrained regionalism and suffer from socio-economic dislocations, the latter an unintended by-product of two-plus decades

of government-instituted economic reform.<sup>20</sup> As the appeal of communist ideology dwindles, Communist Party leaders have increasingly invoked economic prosperity and nationalism to shore up their legitimacy and hold together a deeply fractured polity.<sup>21</sup>

Should Taiwan declare and successfully maintain its independence, failure by Beijing to fulfill its decades-long promise to recover the motherland's last piece of lost territory would surely discredit Chinese rulers and might foment domestic instability. Just as the Athenians worried about the integrity of their empire, so too are national unity and survival of the regime at stake for China.



Third, the side endowed with preponderant armed strength has the luxury of pursuing a harsh diplomacy with the objective of winning without resort to arms (the “acme of skill” in Chinese statecraft).<sup>22</sup> It can attempt to browbeat a weaker opponent into submission by holding out the prospect of defeat and destruction.

This, as much as any coarsening of Athenian virtue during the course of protracted war, helps account for the ruthless, frankly immoral tone of the Athenian pronouncements to the Melians.<sup>23</sup> The Athenian ambassadors waved away the Melian petition for justice: “We on our side will use no fine phrases saying, for example, that we have a right to our empire because we defeated the Persians, or that we have come against you now because of the injuries you have done us—a great mass of words that nobody would believe.”<sup>24</sup> Not persuasion but brute power was deployed at Melos.

China's rhetoric over Taiwan has been equally stark.<sup>25</sup> President Chen's talk of independence has aroused consistent, severe consternation among the Chinese leadership. Even top leaders have not shied from bombast: "We totally have the determination and the ability to crush any attempt to separate Taiwan from China,"

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Communist Party chief Hu Jintao told an enthusiastic crowd of Chinese officials who had gathered to mark Deng Xiaoping's hundredth birthday. "We should extensively

unite all sons and daughters of the Chinese nation, including all Taiwan compatriots, to jointly oppose and contain Taiwan independence splittist forces."<sup>26</sup> Hu's brand of exhortation, which dominates China's cross-Straits diplomacy, closely mirrors Athens's morally dubious attitude toward Melos.

Lieutenant General Liu Yuan of the People's Liberation Army was even more blunt and graphic. Writing in the official *China Youth Daily* in response to rumors that Taipei might attack the Three Gorges Dam during a cross-Straits war, Liu vowed that China would "be seriously on guard against threats from 'Taiwan independence terrorists.'" He insisted that China would not be deterred by such tactics, promising "retaliation that will 'blot out the sky and cover up the earth.'" <sup>27</sup> If Liu's words are any guide, the Chinese are prepared to inflict unthinkable (perhaps nuclear) devastation on the island.

Admittedly, bluster is a staple of Chinese diplomacy, but Beijing has put steel behind its pronouncements, placing force and coercion at the forefront of its strategy toward Taipei. Chinese rulers have clearly set out to use fear, the unavoidable consequence of a sharp power imbalance between contending nations, to modulate Taiwanese behavior.

Fourth, hope is not a strategy in international politics. The Melian representatives held that because their cause was just, they could trust to fortune, or to the Spartans to intervene and avert disaster. They maintained that "in war fortune sometimes makes the odds more level than could be expected from the difference of numbers of the two sides." They also pointed to the geographic proximity of Sparta and an ethnic affinity between Spartans and Melians: "We think [the Spartans] would even endanger themselves for our sake and count the risk more worth taking than in the case of others, because we are so close to the Peloponnese that they could operate more easily," and because "we are of the same race and share the same feelings."

Hoping to disabuse the Melians of their illusions, the Athenians delivered a blunt rejoinder. "Hope, that comforter in danger!" they sneered. Unless "one has solid advantages to fall back upon," in the form of hard power, hope is folly. The Melian army could not compete with the Athenian expeditionary force. The



Athenians, moreover, scoffed at Spartan seapower, a central element in any relief effort. No outside power, let alone fortune or the gods, would step in to save Melos.

Taiwan's apparent overconfidence in the ability and willingness of the United States to defend it during a cross-Straits conflict suggests that Taipei harbors similar hope. Some observers have warned that Taipei's behavior in the past few years, especially following President George W. Bush's 2001 pledge to do "whatever it [takes] to help Taiwan defend herself," reflects a misguided calculation that Washington's support is and will remain unconditional.<sup>28</sup> President Chen's provocative referendum bid prior to the most recent presidential elections seemed to confirm his faith in the United States.<sup>29</sup> In other words, Chen, encouraged by Bush's words, may have concluded that he holds a blank check from Washington to push his agenda, regardless of how Beijing reacts.

Far from being chastened by President Bush's rebuke over the referendum issue or Chen's setback in the December 2004 legislative elections, independence-minded leaders in Taiwan have continued to goad China.<sup>30</sup> The logjam in the Legislative Yuan over the U.S. arms package provides further evidence of a belief among Taiwanese leaders that Washington's defense commitments are absolute. In a stunning display of naiveté, one opposition member reportedly argued that since Taiwan could not possibly defend itself, even with new weaponry, the island should simply hope for American intervention.<sup>31</sup> Another, responding to American pleas to approve the arms package, likened the United States to a "mafia leader" demanding "protection money."<sup>32</sup>

Such statements bespeak a fundamental unseriousness of purpose. The Taiwanese leadership may truly believe that America's resolve to help the island is unshakable. Alternatively, Taipei's inaction could simply be a symptom of the island's venomous partisan politics. Either way, Taiwan could soon find itself in a Melian predicament.

Taipei should not blindly count on the United States to defend it. Even if the political case for U.S. intervention were beyond dispute—say, if China launched an unprovoked attack on the island—Washington's ability to deter and to fight a cross-Straits contingency stands on increasingly shaky ground. Over the next decade, the growing capacity of Chinese naval, air, and missile forces will pose an ever more daunting challenge to American defense planners.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, fears that Beijing will soon be able to deny the U.S. Navy access to the Taiwan Strait in wartime are already palpable in certain Pentagon documents.<sup>34</sup>

China's ability to pursue a strategy of sea denial, then, is growing and will have direct consequences, for both the U.S. military and Taiwan's security.<sup>35</sup> Assuming that the PLA proceeds along its modernization path, it will soon field a force capable of keeping U.S. reinforcements at a distance while Beijing prosecutes a showdown with Taiwan in which the balance of forces overwhelmingly

favors China. Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense has estimated that the Chinese military will gain the upper hand by 2006.<sup>36</sup> Lee Jye, the minister of national defense, recently told lawmakers that the mainland would pose a "reliable threat" by 2015.<sup>37</sup>

If these predictions come to pass, China will have gained the ability to inflict a Melian fate on Chen's regime, securing a swift victory that would forestall American intervention. Beijing could then thereby present the world with the *fait accompli* of a reunified China. These emerging strategic realities should impel Taipei and Washington to rethink their long-standing assumptions surrounding the cross-Strait military balance and its political implications. Taipei must guard against the temptation to free-ride on U.S. defense commitments. As the Chinese military improves its war-fighting capabilities and doctrine, Washington cannot continue to take the PLA as lightly as it has for decades. It behooves the Pentagon to begin thinking ahead about its military strategy for a cross-Strait war.

At the same time, the United States should remain vigilant about Taiwanese actions that could trigger a Chinese military response. In their discussions with Taiwanese leaders, U.S. leaders should attempt to inject a measure of realism into Taipei's strategic thinking. Taiwan is of course free to pursue its destiny as a *de facto* independent country. If it opts for *de jure* independence, however, it must generate the military means necessary to uphold its political aspirations. Washington must caution the island's leadership against the kind of brinkmanship that could end up costing American lives.

Taiwan cannot pin its desire for more international space and independence on American political sympathies alone. No amount of shared democratic values between the two nations will compel the United States to sacrifice its vital national interests. Over the course of its history, argues one perceptive Chinese analyst, "America shows itself to be a country that acts most on its strongest interests. It has never shown a willingness to help a 'drowning dog'" such as Taiwan. Concludes this analyst, "'American honor' seems unlikely to provide a sufficient motivation for American intervention" in the Strait.<sup>38</sup>

Fear, honor, interest—Thucydides could scarcely have phrased it better.

## TAIWAN AS PYLOS

Thucydides' account of the impending demise of Melos underscores the politico-military difficulties that Taiwan will face in the coming years, particularly in light of Taipei's apparent indecision over its defense. Even if Taiwan finds itself in a Melian predicament, however, China will still face daunting operational barriers that will keep very steep the military costs of imposing such a fate on the island. Notwithstanding the Melian precedent, China should be wary of a clash of arms in the Strait, at least in the short term.

If Thucydides' account of the Melian Dialogue provides a cautionary tale for Taipei, his account of another battle, at Pylos, offers the same for Beijing. The battle took place in 425 BC, a few years before the encounter at Melos. The outcome demonstrates the practical difficulties involved with island warfare, even for a combatant that, like Sparta, enjoys military superiority on land, can achieve temporary superiority at sea, and is fighting close to home against an enemy encumbered by long, hazardous lines of communication. If the Melian Dialogue shows that Taiwan needs to beware of the emerging military imbalance in the Strait, the Pylos case warns China that it should not blithely assume that its growing military power would assure it an easy victory over Taiwan.

China, which occupies an operational position similar to that of Sparta, would do well to heed Thucydides' observations on the Athenian-Spartan encounter at Pylos. The Athenian experience shows how difficult it is to take an island by force, even with the advantage of dominant seapower; Sparta's experience shows that a land power can achieve initial success in island warfare yet see its expeditionary force cut off and defeated by an adversary with a superior navy.

What transpired at Pylos? In the spring of 425 BC, "before the corn was ripe," an Athenian fleet under Demosthenes was cruising off the west coast of the Peloponnesus, ostensibly to succor embattled democrats in Corcyra (modern Corfu, off the northwestern coast of Greece near the modern Albanian border) before sailing on to Sicily.<sup>39</sup> But the Athenian commander in fact "had other

ideas."<sup>40</sup> He intended to break with Pericles' strategy of peripheral amphibious raids, landing at Pylos, some fifty miles from Sparta, and building a permanent fort there. Demosthenes' fellow

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commanders, Eurymedon and Sophocles, wanted to push on to Corcyra, there to confront a Spartan flotilla.<sup>41</sup> Luck favored Demosthenes—a squall carried the Athenian fleet into Pylos, where he "at once urged them to fortify the place," pointing out that it "was distinguished from others of the kind by having a harbor close by."<sup>42</sup>

The advantages of fortifying Pylos were many. From a permanent base in the Peloponnesus, Athenian triremes could range across the peninsula's maritime frontiers. From there the Athenians could foment rebellion among the large population of Spartan helots (slaves), threatening the survival of the Spartan regime. Local allies could "do [the Spartans] the greatest harm from it."<sup>43</sup> Pylos would be a magnet for escaped helots.<sup>44</sup> In short, it would be a permanent irritant to the Spartans, much as the Spartans' periodic invasions of Attica vexed the Athenians. Sparta would find itself, in effect, in the position of modern China

with respect to Taiwan: China's Cold War confrontations with the United States over Taiwan stemmed in part from fears that the island might be exploited as a geopolitical springboard from which hostile external forces would seek to interfere in the mainland's internal affairs. This sentiment persists. Indeed, Chinese leaders have long asserted that overt Taiwanese collusion with "foreign forces" (a thinly veiled reference to the United States) would constitute a *casus belli* comparable to an outright declaration of independence.

As for the Spartans, although they "at first made light of the news" that Demosthenes' troops were building a fort, they quickly grasped the geopolitical significance of a nearby Athenian outpost.<sup>45</sup> The Spartans recalled an invasion force then in Attica after only fifteen days and diverted it toward Pylos by land and by sea, "hoping to capture with ease a work constructed in haste, and held by a feeble garrison" by joint action.<sup>46</sup> The Spartan commander planned to block the two channels into the harbor, using "a line of ships placed close together with their prows turned toward the sea" to turn away the expected Athenian reinforcements.<sup>47</sup> To buttress the Spartan defenses further, a force of some 420 hoplite warriors (heavy infantry in armor) landed on Sphacteria, a long, narrow island that sat athwart the harbor mouth.

By this means both the island and the continent would be hostile to the Athenians, as they would be unable to land on either; and since the shore of Pylos itself outside the inlet toward the open sea had no harbor, there would be no point that the Athenians could use as a base from which to relieve their countrymen. Thus the Spartans would in all probability become masters of the place without a sea fight or risk, as there had been little preparation for the occupation and there was no food [in the Athenian fort].<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, Demosthenes, realizing that a joint Spartan assault was imminent, "was himself not idle."<sup>49</sup> He took charge of the Athenian defenses, paying particular attention to the beaches, the weakest point in the defensive perimeter. The Spartan troops were ultimately unable to establish a beachhead, "owing to the difficulty of the ground," which kept them from landing except in small detachments, as well as to "the unflinching tenacity of the Athenians." "It was a strange reversal of the order of things," observes Thucydides, "for Athenians to be fighting from land . . . against Spartans coming from the sea," since Spartans "were chiefly famous at the time as an inland people and superior by land" while Athenians were "a maritime people with a navy that had no equal."<sup>50</sup> China, a traditional continental power with minimal amphibious forces, would do well to bear this Spartan example in mind.<sup>51</sup>

The Spartans desisted from their attacks after two days of fighting and prepared to invest Pylos. Before they could do so, however, Athenian reinforcements arrived on the scene, in the form of fifty warships. The Athenians

immediately assailed the Spartan vessels, some of them lined up for battle, some still beached and being manned. The Athenian triremes put the Spartan ships to flight “at once,” disabled “a good many vessels” and captured five, rammed some of the ships that had fled to shore, and began towing away beached vessels abandoned by their crews. “Maddened by a disaster” that cut them off on Sphacteria, proud Spartan infantrymen were reduced to wading into the surf in a vain effort to drag their vessels back ashore.<sup>52</sup> “The stunning effect and importance” of the Athenian action, notes a recent historian of the campaign, “cannot be exaggerated.” Spartan commanders immediately requested an armistice, agreeing among other things to turn over their fleet to the Athenians and to allow the Athenian fleet to continue with the blockade it had imposed on the island while Spartan envoys set sail for Athens to parley.<sup>53</sup> As for contemporary China, the reigning consensus among Western analysts holds that it would likely meet Sparta’s fate should it attempt a conventional military assault on the island. Whether Beijing would accept a diplomatic settlement following a disastrous military defeat in the Taiwan Strait is less certain.

The Spartan delegates, upon arriving in Attica, appealed to the Athenian assembly to conclude a magnanimous peace. They exhorted the Athenians to “employ your present success to advantage, to keep what you have got and gain honor and reputation besides,” while suggesting that Athens would pay dearly if it opted to “grasp continually at something further.” The Spartans were uncowed, however, claiming that their defeat had been the result of miscalculation rather than “any decay in our power.” For “what power in Hellas stood higher than we did?”<sup>54</sup> Accepting peace now, they claimed, would spare the Athenians the permanent enmity of Sparta while helping them gain the acceptance of the Greek world, which would be grateful for concord between the two great powers. Nonetheless, Cleon, a popular—and belligerent—Athenian leader, prevailed upon the assembly to demand more: the Spartans must agree to allow their infantrymen to be brought from Sphacteria to Athens, and they must surrender certain territories.

Thucydides offers here some telling commentary about the perils of island warfare. Even Athens, the preeminent sea power of Greek antiquity, encountered difficulties at Pylos. The Athenians besieging Sphacteria found the Spartan resistance frustratingly resilient until their own reinforcements arrived, giving them an unchallengeable numerical edge. Athenian logistics were strained, making it difficult to maintain the blockade. The Spartans, for their part, displayed considerable ingenuity, promising to reward with their freedom helots willing to carry provisions to Sphacteria and thus risk capture by the besieging force. The Athenians’ “greatest discouragement arose from the unexpectedly long time which it took to reduce a body of men shut up in a desert island, with

only brackish water to drink.” The Athenian garrison received few seaborne provisions, even in good weather; the surrounding countryside “offered no resources in itself”; and the onset of winter would have ultimately compelled Athens to lift the siege, allowing Spartan troops to sail away in the craft that delivered their stores.<sup>55</sup>

In any event, Cleon’s harsh demands carried in the Athenian assembly, but the Spartans rejected them. Cleon “violently assailed” the emissaries, then exhorted the assembly to send a new expeditionary force to Pylos to overpower the Spartan resistance. The assembly took him up on the idea; having boasted that he could achieve victory in a matter of weeks and reacting to needling from his critics, Cleon consented to lead the force. Detachments of the new force landed on opposite sides of the island; the Athenians all together now outnumbered the Spartans on Sphacteria on the order of twenty-five to one. Given these lopsided numbers, the outcome was certain, notwithstanding the Spartan hoplites’ individual superiority over the assailants.<sup>56</sup> Peace ultimately followed—vindicating Cleon’s more bellicose approach to the war in the minds of some scholars: “The events at Pylos completely changed the outlook of the war.”

With valuable Spartan hostages, Athens needed no longer fear a Spartan invasion. It had little to fear at sea, since it had kept the fleet surrendered by Sparta under the terms of the armistice (reneging on its commitments under that armistice). It was free to exact new tribute from its allies, replenishing a treasury depleted by prolonged war. Athens had also gained the upper hand on a broader level. Until Pylos, the Peloponnesians had inflicted damage upon their enemies while suffering little damage to their own interests. “Now the Athenians could inflict continuing harm on their enemies, on land and by sea, fearing no retaliation.”<sup>57</sup>

To apply the case to the present day, a similarly propitious outcome for the United States after a conflict over Taiwan would surely prove to be a strategic nightmare for China. What other lessons does the Pylos episode hold? First, as Athens learned during the early stages of its offensive against Sphacteria, islands can be at once invaluable from a geopolitical standpoint and difficult to invade—especially when they are in the hands of stubborn defenders. Even countries with powerful naval forces should leaven their calculations with a healthy respect for this reality. The political and military costs of naval and amphibious warfare can be prohibitive. Despite the geopolitical value that China attaches to Taiwan, the island may not be the pushover Beijing seemingly expects.

Second, and closely related, time may not be on China’s side during a Taiwan Strait contingency. Whether a barrage of ballistic missiles would cow Taipei into suing for peace, as Beijing seems to assume, is an open question. Nor does China have the means to land a large expeditionary force on the island. While the PLA

Navy may be able to fend off the U.S. reinforcements for weeks, that might not be enough. Should the U.S. Navy force the Strait, any Chinese forces on Taiwan could find themselves blockaded by the Seventh Fleet, much as the Spartans on Sphacteria found themselves encircled by Athenian triremes. Humiliating defeat could follow.

Third, military failure can endanger the survival of a regime as easily as can allowing the defiance of a wayward province to go unpunished. Sparta had to fear the possibility of a helot-led revolution after the debacle at Pylos. So too might China's social, economic, and political fissures widen if Beijing tried—and failed—to reunify the motherland by force of arms.

Fourth, the repercussions of failure for China's international standing could be dire, as they were for Sparta. "After the victory at Pylos," observes the prominent historian Donald Kagan, "no island could think of defying the Athenians."<sup>58</sup> Likewise, an American victory in a Taiwan contingency could bind not only Taiwan but Asia's other island nations to the United States, setting back China's quest to resume its "central position" in Asian politics.<sup>59</sup> Like Taiwan, China should take note of Thucydides' enduring wisdom.

#### A MELIAN FATE?

If taken to heart, lessons of the Peloponnesian War could help clarify thinking—and dispel dangerous illusions—in Taipei, Beijing, and Washington. Does Taiwan's predicament resemble that of Melos? Will China heed the lessons of Pylos and take a cautious stance in the Strait, or will it plunge ahead and risk suffering Sparta's fate? Will the United States clarify its cross-Strait diplomacy and ready its military strategy and forces in case diplomacy fails?

While historical comparisons of this kind are always inexact, four factors will determine which model applies. First is the matter of the military balance. As has been seen, China is poised to seize its advantage over Taiwan. Beijing is developing military means commensurate with its expansive political ends and will, by many measures, soon hold a commanding position in the Strait. Yet a Chinese victory is far from foreordained. The Chinese navy's feeble amphibious fleet, for instance, appears unequal to the missions likely to be assigned it. If China chooses to act against Taiwan without substantially strengthening its military capabilities in such areas, Beijing could well meet the fate of the Spartans on Pylos. In fact, Chinese weakness at present suggests that Beijing will continue to demonstrate a measure of restraint for the rest of this decade, biding its time while marshaling the capacity to subdue Taiwan. If Beijing remedies such weaknesses, gaining true military dominance not only over Taiwan but over any American force likely to be sent against it, it could skew cross-Strait relations in a Melian direction.



Second, the decisions taken by China's political leadership are another obvious factor shaping events in the Strait. In keeping with the Melian precedent, Beijing may well opt to pursue an even more assertive, no-nonsense diplomacy as its strategic posture improves. Beijing's calculations, however, could and should be different from those of the Athenians. Athens could justly scoff at Spartan seapower, which at the time was no match for their own. It was foolish, consequently, for the Melians to wager their survival on Peloponnesian reinforcements. China cannot so lightly discount U.S. military power. Nor will Chinese leaders be eager to earn the enmity of the world superpower at a time when they covet international commerce and the economic development that comes with it. These considerations warrant caution on Beijing's part.

Third, Taipei's actions will have an impact. The contrast between Chinese resolution and Taiwanese irresolution could scarcely be sharper where military affairs are concerned. Whether by conscious decision or through Taiwanese lawmakers' inability to set aside partisanship, Taiwan's means are increasingly out of sync

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*The cross-Strait military balance is tipping rapidly in favor of the mainland at a time when pressure is mounting on Beijing to act.*

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with its own political ends. That will be doubly true if Chen Shui-bian expands those ends by pressing ahead with his plans for a new constitution and ultimate independence. Taipei needs to put its

military affairs in order and think twice about provoking Beijing—else it could meet a Melian fate. Taipei must also come to terms with the operational constraints intrinsic to a contingency in the Strait for the U.S. military, the exigencies of worldwide American security commitments, and the reluctance of the United States to make an enemy of China, East Asia's foremost power. These factors could impel Washington to hesitate in a crisis, allowing Beijing to achieve a Melian outcome. Taipei's confidence in American intervention, then, could be misplaced.

Finally, the United States faces daunting challenges in managing the volatility of cross-Strait dynamics. Washington's ability to prevent either side from edging toward conflict could come under increasing strain. In particular, U.S. deterrence and reassurance in the Strait could continue to erode, especially in light of other pressing global security commitments. The shifting military balance in Beijing's favor and China's growing geopolitical preponderance have increased the likelihood that Taipei will be forced to make the unsavory choices that Melos had to face. From an operational perspective, China is steadily rectifying its military shortfalls, easing the operational problems that both Athens and Sparta confronted at Pylos. Diplomatically, Washington's limited influence over the course of events in Taiwanese politics could further exacerbate the deteriorating



strategic equation if the island's leadership continues to permit its military means to languish. What the United States can do to arrest these trends remains uncertain. In short, Washington may find it increasingly difficult to dissuade China from attempting a Melian solution to the cross-Strait impasse.

Leaders in all three nations should take Thucydides' lessons to heart as they frame their diplomatic and military strategies. On balance, the four factors examined above suggest that the belligerent logic behind the Melian analogy will eventually outweigh the operational constraints intrinsic to the lessons of Pylos—making war thinkable for Beijing. The Melian outcome was determined by basic structural features of international politics: power and fear. In contrast, the operational constraints demonstrated at Pylos may prove to be transitory for China, soluble as its military modernization continues. One thing is clear: Taipei cannot afford to put off work on its own defense needs. China is watching. Taiwan must put its own house in order—or run the risk of becoming a latter-day Melos.

#### NOTES

1. See David Shambaugh, "The New Stability in U.S.-China Relations: Causes and Consequences," in *Strategic Surprise? U.S.-China Relations in the Early Twenty-first Century*, ed. Jonathan D. Pollack (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 2003), pp. 23–33.
2. "'New Constitution' Means Timetable for Taiwan Independence: Official," Xinhua, 14 April 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/News/2004/Xinhua-140404.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/News/2004/Xinhua-140404.htm). For missile deployments see, for instance, "Taiwan Military Warns of China Missile Threat," Reuters, 30 September 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2004/Reuters-300904.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2004/Reuters-300904.htm); Chris Cockel, "Powell Cautions Mainland China on Missile Build-Up across Taiwan Strait," *China Post*, 7 November 2003, available at [taiwansecurity.org/CP/2003/CP-071103.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/CP/2003/CP-071103.htm).
3. See, for instance, "Chen Says Defend 'New Constitution,'" *China Post*, 17 June 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/CP/2004/CP-170604.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/CP/2004/CP-170604.htm).
4. "China Warns Army Can and Will 'Smash' Taiwan Independence," Agence France Presse, 1 August 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/AFP/2004/AFP-010804.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/AFP/2004/AFP-010804.htm).
5. See James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "The Influence of Mahan upon China's Maritime Strategy," *Comparative Strategy* 24 (March 2005).
6. Edward Cody, "Politics Puts Hold on Taiwan Arms Purchase," *Washington Post*, 10 October 2004, p. A28. The results of Taiwan's 2004 legislative elections, which denied President Chen the electoral mandate he needed to pursue a constitution and perhaps independence, promise to prolong the impasse on U.S. arms sales.
7. See, for instance, Alinec Hung, "Protest in Taiwan against U.S. Arms Sales," Reuters, 26 September 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2004/Reuters-260904.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2004/Reuters-260904.htm); "Defense Chief Lee Threatens to Resign over Weapons Deal," *China Post*, 20 September 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/CP/2004/CP-250904.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/CP/2004/CP-250904.htm).
8. See, for instance, "Republic of China Navy," Federation of American Scientists, available at [www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/ship/row/rocn/index.html](http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/ship/row/rocn/index.html).
9. "U.S. Denies Sale of AEGIS Ships to Proceed Soon," *Taiwan News*, 17 August 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/TN/2004/TN-170804.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/TN/2004/TN-170804.htm).
10. Yale's Donald Kagan provides a perceptive account of the Athenian expedition to Melos

- in his *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 148–55, and *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Viking, 2003), pp. 247–49. Kagan indulges in a bit of armchair psychoanalysis vis-à-vis Athens, attributing the assault on Melos in part to the Athenians' frustration at their futility against Sparta in land combat.
11. All references to the Melian Dialogue come from Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin, 1954), pp. 400–408.
  12. See, for example, "Taiwan Could Fend Off China Attack for 2 Weeks—Paper," Reuters, 12 August 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2004/Reuters-120804.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2004/Reuters-120804.htm).
  13. The Taiwanese Ministry of National Defense estimates that the balance of forces will tip against the island as soon as 2006. China is pushing ahead with its military construction program, while partisan feuding in Taiwan's Legislative Yuan has stalled a U.S. arms package intended to preserve the balance. Flor Wang, "CNA: Mainland China to Have Military Edge over Taiwan in 2006: MND," 8 October 2004, FBIS CPP20041008000185.
  14. The specter of Taiwan as a U.S. naval base clearly haunts Beijing. "Militarily," contends one Chinese analyst, "Taiwan is a potential [base] which the U.S. could use in the western Pacific. The use of Taiwan could enable effective control of sea lines of communication between northeast Asia and southeast Asia and the Middle East," threatening Beijing's access to vital resources and the access of the PLA Navy to the high seas. "Thus, the U.S. sees Taiwan as an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier,' able to serve as a 'north-south relay station for the Seventh Fleet' and thereby give the United States a 'maximum degree of control over China's East and South Sea Fleets.'" Lin Zhibo, "New Academic Analysis: Will There Be an All-Out U.S. Intervention in a Taiwan Strait War?" *People's Daily Online*, 20 July 2004, FBIS CPP20040720000040.
  15. The importance of Taiwan, however, is not confined to the purely naval sphere. China's strategic thought about Taiwan also exhibits a strong economic hue. In the summer 2004 issue of *The National Interest*, David Hale documented China's large and growing reliance on commercial shipping for its economic vitality. China's economic development, as well as its capacity for naval power projection, would remain perpetually at risk should the island chain remain in unfriendly hands. David Hale, "China's Growing Appetites," *National Interest* 76 (Summer 2004), pp. 137–47.
  16. Dean Acheson, "Remarks by the Secretary of State [Acheson] before the National Press Club, Washington, January 12, 1950," in *Documents on American Foreign Relations*, vol. 12, *January 1–December 31, 1950*, ed. Raymond Dennett and Robert K. Turner (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1951), p. 431.
  17. Ross Munro, "Taiwan: What China Really Wants," *National Review*, 11 October 1999, available at [www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1282/is\\_19\\_51/ai\\_56754228](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1282/is_19_51/ai_56754228).
  18. The most prominent advocate of this way of thinking about China's maritime destiny was Adm. Liu Huaqing, who commanded the PLA Navy in the 1980s. Liu exhorted Beijing to build up naval forces capable of waging an "active offshore defense," as opposed to coastal defense. China, he maintained, should gain control of the waters within the island chain before pursuing a global, blue-water navy. Taiwan remains a barrier to Liu's aspirations. For a more comprehensive overview of Liu Huaqing's vision, see Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy Enters the Twenty-first Century* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2001), especially pp. 165–68.
  19. See Zhu Feng and Drew Thompson, "Why Taiwan Really Matters to China," *China Brief* 4, no. 19 (30 September 2004), available at [www.jamestown.org/publications\\_details.php?volume\\_id=395&issue\\_id=3090&article\\_id=2368616](http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=395&issue_id=3090&article_id=2368616). According to the authors, "[The] loss of Taiwan could spur dissent in other provinces with separatist tendencies, such as Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Tibet. Losing Taiwan could upset the regional long-term plans for integration that have been relatively successful to date." For details on separatist activities in Xinjiang, see Igor Rotar, "The Growing Problem of Uighur Separatism," *China Brief* 4, no. 8 (15 April 2004), available at [www.jamestown.org/publications\\_details.php?volume\\_id=395&issue\\_id=2912&article\\_id=23548](http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=395&issue_id=2912&article_id=23548).

20. For the sources and consequences of social dislocation, see John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, "Social Change and Political Reform in China: Meeting the Challenges of Success," *China Quarterly* 176 (December 2003), pp. 903–25, and Yongshun Cai, "The Resistance of Chinese Laid-off Workers in the Reform Period," *China Quarterly* 170 (June 2002), pp. 327–44.
21. See, for instance, John F. Copper, "The 'Glue' That Holds China Together," *World & I* 17, no. 7 (July 2002), pp. 20–26. For details on the Chinese government's increasing willingness to exploit nationalism to attain foreign-policy goals, particularly in the aftermath of the 1999 Belgrade embassy bombing incident, see James Miles, "Chinese Nationalism, U.S. Policy and Asian Security," *Survival* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2000), pp. 51–71.
22. See, for instance, Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), especially p. 77.
23. Moral decay has been a common theme among commentators on Thucydides' *History*. See, for instance, W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), especially pp. 147–57, and Richard Ned Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist," *American Political Science Review* 95 (September 2001), pp. 547–60.
24. Victor Davis Hanson provides a sprightly account of the Persian Wars, including the leading role played by Athens, in his *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Anchor, 2002), pp. 27–59.
25. Former Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui's talk of "special state-to-state relations" between the mainland and the island provoked an outpouring of vitriol from Beijing. Chinese commentators decried what they viewed as a move to renounce the long-standing one-China principle, which has governed cross-Straits relations since the 1970s. A typical example from an official daily was "Commentary: Nature of 'Special State-to-State Relations' Is Splittism," *People's Daily Online*, 7 August 1999, available at [english.people.com.cn/english/199908/07/enc\\_19990807001026\\_TopNews.html](http://english.people.com.cn/english/199908/07/enc_19990807001026_TopNews.html).
26. "China Determined to Crush Taiwan Independence—Hu," Reuters, 22 August 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2004/Reuters-220804.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2004/Reuters-220804.htm).
27. "China General Threatens War If Taiwan Targets Dam," Reuters, 16 June 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2004/Reuters-160604.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2004/Reuters-160604.htm).
28. Kelly Wallace, "Bush Pledges Whatever It Takes to Defend Taiwan," CNN.com, 25 April 2001, available at [archives.cnn.com/2001/ALLPOLITICS/04/24/bush.taiwan.abcf/](http://archives.cnn.com/2001/ALLPOLITICS/04/24/bush.taiwan.abcf/).
29. Edward Cody and Philip P. Pan, "China Warns Taiwan Referendum Will Endanger Peace: Beijing Says Vote Is Prelude to Independence," *Washington Post*, 11 February 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/WP/2004/WP-110204.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/WP/2004/WP-110204.htm).
30. "Powell Stresses U.S. Opposition to Taiwan Changing Status Quo," Agence France Presse, 24 February 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/AFP/2004/AFP-240204.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/AFP/2004/AFP-240204.htm).
31. "Yu Defends Advanced Arms Procurement," Central News Agency, 22 September 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/CNA/2004/CNA-220904.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/CNA/2004/CNA-220904.htm).
32. "U.S. Official Warns of 'Repercussions' If Taiwan Fails to Approve Weapons Deal," Associated Press, 6 October 2004; "Warning on Arms Purchase Angers Taipei Opposition," Reuters, 7 October 2004, available at [taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2004/Reuters-071004.htm](http://taiwansecurity.org/Reu/2004/Reuters-071004.htm).
33. See Holmes and Yoshihara, "Influence of Mahan upon China's Maritime Strategy."
34. See, for example, U.S. Defense Dept., *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China* (Washington, D.C.: July 2004).
35. For a broad assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the PLA Navy, see Lyle Goldstein and William Murray, "China Emerges as a Maritime Power," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (October 2004). For an assessment of China's submarine fleet, a pivotal element in the nation's sea-denial strategy, see Goldstein and Murray, "Undersea Dragons: China's Maturing Submarine Force," *International Security* 28, no. 4 (Spring 2004), pp. 161–96.
36. Wang, "Mainland China to Have Military Edge."

37. Lin Chieh-yu, "China a Threat by 2015, Defense Minister Says," *Taipei Times*, 5 October 2004, available at taiwansecurity.org/TT/2004/TT-051004.htm.
38. "Will the U.S. Really Militarily Intervene in the Taiwan Straits?" *Renmin Haijun*, 21 August 2004, FBIS CPP20040922000227.
39. Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, intro. Victor Davis Hanson (New York: Free Press, 1996), p. 223. The operations at Pylos are described on pp. 265–98 of the Rex Warner translation of Thucydides, cited previously.
40. Donald Kagan, *The Archidamian War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), p. 221.
41. Pericles' strategy is profiled among other places in Donald Kagan, "The First Revisionist Historian," *Commentary* 85, no. 5 (May 1988), pp. 43–49. In brief, Pericles warned Athenians to conserve their empire, showing Sparta it could not prevail in an extended war. A negotiated peace would ultimately follow. A peripheral maritime strategy circumvented Sparta's overwhelming dominance in land combat while making use of the overwhelming naval superiority of Athens.
42. Strassler, ed., *Landmark Thucydides*, pp. 223–24.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 224.
44. Kagan, *Archidamian War*, pp. 221–22.
45. Strassler, ed., *Landmark Thucydides*, p. 224.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 227. Kagan disputes Thucydides' description of the Spartan plan to close the south channel, noting that the south entrance was far too wide for such a strategy to work. Kagan, *Archidamian War*, p. 227.
48. Strassler, ed., *Landmark Thucydides*, pp. 227–28.
49. *Ibid.*, pp. 228.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 230.
51. "People's Liberation Army Navy," Federation of American Scientists, available at [www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/ship/row/plan/index.html](http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/ship/row/plan/index.html).
52. Strassler, ed., *Landmark Thucydides*, pp. 230–31.
53. Kagan, *Archidamian War*, pp. 229–30. Kagan attributes the Spartans' sudden willingness to make peace to a shortage of military manpower. While the number of prisoners was small by modern standards, it accounted for fully a tenth of the Spartan army, the size of which was kept small by the Spartans' strict policy of eugenics, their practice of separating men from women during prime childbearing years, the stringent code of honor they imposed on soldiers, and their requirement that members of the leading caste marry only among themselves.
54. Strassler, ed., *Landmark Thucydides*, pp. 233–34.
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 237–38.
56. Kagan, *Archidamian War*, pp. 238–47.
57. Kagan, for example, is generally sympathetic to Cleon, accusing Thucydides of bias against the brash Athenian. An early peace would have meant accepting assurances from Sparta that could have been disavowed at any time. Kagan, *Archidamian War*, pp. 234–38, 248–50.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
59. On China's aspiration to resume its status as Asia's Middle Kingdom, see Chen Jian, *The China Challenge for the Twenty-first Century* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1998), pp. 4–8.